

Letter from Samuel P. Langley to Alexander Graham Bell, October 11, 1902

File Confidential S SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. *Washington, U.S.A* . UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM. INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES. BUREAU OF ETHNOLOGY. NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK. ASTROPHYSICAL OBSERVATORY. October 11, 1902
My dear Mr. Bell:

I have been back from England about a fortnight, and should have accepted your invitation to Baddeck, if I had had time, not only to have the pleasure of seeing you again, but to explain to you personally the very important reasons for a change in the appointment of a new head of the Bureau of Ethnology.

At the time when Major Powell seemed certainly near his death, influential Members of Congress represented to me the unlikelihood of the appropriation for the Bureau being continued, unless some radical change were made in its methods of management. You know what Major Powell's physical condition was for some years past, and how little moral responsibility belonged to his official acts. The Major's notable personality, and the history of his connection with the Institution were in part the causes, I suppose, of his exceptionally independent position outside of usual administrative relations. May I not add , to you who knew my affection for him, that it seemed hardly possible for me to make certain changes , while he lived on , in weakness ?

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It had been an explicit understanding with Major Powell when I first consented to the appointment of Mr. McGee as an assistant there, that he was not to look upon himself as in the line of succession to the charge of the Bureau. Other reasons which proved the wisdom of this condition developed themselves with time. It has increasingly appeared that the needed changes are unlikely to originate within the Bureau, and there were other

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very weighty reasons against the appointment of Mr. McGee, of which I will speak to you in private

Accordingly, some months ago, I proffered the position with some other title than that of Director, to Mr. W.H. Holmes, who, upon the dear Major's death, accepted it , not at all from motives of interest, but from those of duty.

Mr. Holmes was chosen not only on account of his high scientific position, and because he knew the Bureau's affairs more intimately than any other man, by reason of his constant relationships to it, but because it was to be assumed that the change could not at first be altogether agreeable to Mr. McGee, and because I knew that Mr. Holmes, who shares my own respect for Mr. McGee's scientific abilities, could make it more agreeable than any other person in his place , for him, to whom he has the kindest personal feelings.

I repeat that Mr. Holmes, understanding the whole case, accepted the place from no motives of interest but from those of duty, and from a wish to spare his friend all the disagreeables possible.

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I am not an ethnologist myself, and have no professional knowledge of the matters of which you write in your letter of September 27th, which has only just come before me. I have never seen the report of which you speak, but as far as I can understand the question, I am in sympathy with you in your view that it should be a leading part of the policy of the Bureau to make practical applications of ethnology, and thus to show the value of its work.

I also quite concur with your feeling that the scope of the Bureau should be expanded, so as to include the aboriginal races inhabiting Porto Rico, the Hawaiian Islands, and other actual possessions of the United States. As to the Philippines, there are objections

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not arising on any scientific ground, but very strong ones, which I can explain to you satisfactorily when I see you.

All this is indeed my own wish, and so far as I have a policy, it is this that I have strongly represented to Congress in person.

Without a conference with you, my dear Mr. Bell; you cannot understand some practical difficulties about carrying out some of the suggestions which you favor, but all of which, so far as I learn them from your letter, I am favorably inclined to.

I know your personal regard for Mr. McGee, and I beg you to believe that conditions in my judgment of the most vital importance to the Bureau, considered as a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, have guided me in the ver deliberate 4 action that I have taken; and until we talk of it, I will ask you to trust me so far as to believe that the chiefest difficulty of all I have encountered, has been the thought that I may be doing something not personally agreeable to you, in carrying out what I have no doubt is my official duty, and what I hope you will agree, when you come to know the circumstances, is best.

In the meantime, I shall remember that Mr. McGee is some one to whom you wish well, and as far as this official duty will admit, if he can adapt himself to the change, he shall suffer in no way from it that I can prevent.

My sending you so long a letter is something wholly outside of my custom. I beg you will consider it not an official, so much as a wholly private, friendly and confidential one.

I am, with constant personal regard, Yours very truly, S. P. Langley A. Graham Bell, Esq.,
Baddeck, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.